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The Conceptual Framework of Humboldtian  
Ethnolinguistics in German Africanistics

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1. Introduction

Dealing with what seems to be an entirely German matter in front of an almost exclusively non-German audience may require a word of explanation. It is my belief that we are witnessing the Götterdämmerung of nationality-oriented scholarship in many if not all sciences. In African Studies, African scholars in a steadily increasing number are now taking over from non-African colleagues who until now have been the only ones to deal with African matters in a scholarly manner--provisionally, so to speak. In this situation it may prove to be useful to reconsider the aims and approaches of traditional Africanistic work in the light of the appealing opportunity of an international division of labour in the field. Africa to the Africans? Yes, and no because in the face of the immense tasks no single national university and government in Africa can be expected to cover and finance the whole range of necessary and promising research activities, either within its own state or even across national boundaries in an all-African perspective. On the other hand there are valuable traditions in non-African scholarship that cannot be transplanted into modern African research institutions as easily as, for example, discovery procedures and evaluation techniques. International cooperation including the open discussion of contrasting or even conflicting theorems inherent in the various "national schools" of the past ought to result in a better mutual understanding and the furthering of the science as a whole. This paper is meant to be a contribution to the achievement of these goals.

Besides aiming at presenting aspects of traditional German Africanistic studies relevant to current issues in the rapidly expanding field of the sociology of language and its relation to general linguistic theory, this paper shall advance first steps towards an integrated theory of Africanistics which centres around the hypothesis of a sociologically, psychologically, and linguistically definable "Africanity" as an areal feature of human social behaviour. I was induced to explore the conceptual framework of traditional German Africanistics after certain methodological questions arose whilst attempting to transfer the idea of D. Westermann's comprehensive Africanistics to practical

field operations during my participation in a recent linguistic research programme in the Lake Chad area carried out by members of Hamburg University's Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen under the direction of Professor Johannes Lukas. Unfortunately Prof. Lukas could not be present at this conference and asked me to introduce aspects of the programme<sup>1</sup> to this distinguished audience. Since until now hardly any results have been published<sup>2</sup> because of the recency of the field research, I shall introduce the programme by reflecting on its conceptual background. This will simultaneously serve to lay open those inherent traits of traditional German Africanistics which for long periods in the past have initiated substantial research activities that definitely merit labels such as "sociolinguistic", "ethnolinguistic", or "ethnosemantic", at the roots of which lay the syncretistic and universalistic thinking of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835).

For Humboldt the study of language was the study of content as expression of world views. The diversity of languages is not one of sounds and signs, but a diversity of world perspectives (von Humboldt 1907:152). Language is thus extracted from its function as medium: language itself is not a work (ergon), but rather an activity (energeia), it is itself creative rather than being something created (von Humboldt 1907:44). This led von Humboldt (1907:89ff.) to the concept of the "inner form" of language in which he was more interested than in the outer form. "Humboldt believes that all those features, from the phonology, to the grammar, to the individual peculiarities of designation contained in the lexicon, that distinguish one language from another can be referred back to the operation of that language's inner form. Thus, it is the dynamics of a language's inner form that determines its peculiar world perspective." (Miller 1968:33). Wilhelm von Humboldt had thus brought the classical romantic linguistic concepts to a final stage: language is seen as a whole, not just as sound, but also as content and in its relation to man, culture, and world perspective (Helbig 1974:13). Unlike later idealistic conceptions of the Neo-Humboldtians around Leo Weisgerber in Germany, Humboldt's term Volksgeist (national mentality)--despite all mystification--contained definite materialistic elements, since it is rather a geographical-ethnological term (Helbig 1974:14). A renaissance of Humboldtian thoughts was observed after Second World War not only in West Germany where the Neo-Humboldtians tried to combine Humboldt with the teaching of de Saussure, but also in the U.S.A. where the relationship between language and cognition was discussed along the lines of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. As Dell Hymes (1964:669) had already pointed out: "Bloomfield...had signalled von Humboldt's work as leading the way both to the special philologies of the various language families of the world, and 'the study of the conditions and laws of language: its psychic and social character and its historical development'; but subsequent American linguistics seemed to forget von Humboldt until after Second World War and the interests awakened by discussions centered around Whorf."

## 2. Currents in traditional German Africanistics

The Lake Chad programme which was carried out by members of the Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen between 1972 and 1974 served a dual purpose: on the one hand it aimed at collecting primary linguistic data of little known languages in the area especially of those belonging to the Chadic branch of Afroasiatic. On the other hand the choice of the region implied another equally important aspect: the documentation of social, cultural, and historical data of ethnic groups liable to lose their linguistic and cultural identity under the expansive influence of dominant civilizations. The Lake Chad area in its widest geographical sense is an extraordinarily well suited region for the study of large scale language contact not only between but also within genetically related language groups. A glance at a map of languages and language families shows the degree of fragmentation that resulted from historical population movements and language shifts at the important cross-road of the great trans-African trade routes. With the exception of Khoisan members of all major language families of Africa meet in the vicinity of Lake Chad: the Semitic and Chadic branches of Afroasiatic, the Saharan and Chari-Nile branches of Nilo-Saharan, the Benue-Congo branch of Congo-Kordofanian as well as the latter's Adamawa branch. Different economical and political systems conflict where pagans still oppose the advance of Islam and Christianity and where mallams, traders, and slave-raiders in their walled cities have always looked down upon those hostile savages in the plains, swamps, or mountain regions of their cities' hinterlands. New national boundaries between Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger now cut across the instable set-up that the modern states have inherited from the former colonial rulers, dissecting traditional lines of contact and solidarity. Re-orientation towards new political centres creates new contact situations which rapidly result in the merger of the manifold traditions into the melting pot of modern African national civilizations. In this situation it was felt necessary to design a research programme that would result in the description of social and cultural facets of particular speech communities in interaction, observable through manifestations in patterns of language use. Not only the linguistic, but also the social, political, cultural, and historical identity of the ethnic group under research was to be defined through the application of macro-linguistic techniques and the evaluation of oral traditions and literature.

The programme was organised as a series of individual research projects: Prof. Johannes Lukas on Kotoko and a number of Chadic languages spoken in Chad Republic; Heide Reboul(-Mirt) on Wandala in Northern Cameroon; Norbert Cyffer on Buduma on the Lake Chad islands and peripheral Kanuri groups in Nigeria; and the author on a Chadic language called Lamang and adjacent idioms in the foot hills and plateaux of the Mandara Mountains in Northeastern Nigeria along the Cameroonian border. The programme is well embedded in a long time research activity on the Lake Chad area at the Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen, Hamburg.

In 1954 Johannes Lukas (born 7.10.1901) became the director of this institution--twenty years after his famous first reports on the linguistic situation in that region<sup>3</sup> which resulted in the classification of language groups that now bear the names Saharan, Maban, Central Sudanic, and Chadic. The study of Kanuri and of various Chadic languages became the focal point of research in the years of and following Lukas' directorship: out of 12 doctoral theses compiled between 1955 and 1975 six deal with Chadic languages and two with Kanuri, starting off with the works of such outstanding scholars in the field of African linguistics as Carl Hoffmann, now at the University of Ibadan, and Herrmann Jungraithmayr, now at Marburg University.<sup>4</sup>

When Lukas in 1956 changed the name of the Hamburg institute from "Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen" to "Seminar für Afrikanische Sprachen und Kulturen" this act signalled an attempt to combine three discernable currents in pre-war German Africanistics: the historical linguistic approach of Carl Meinhof, Hamburg; the comprehensive socio-cultural approach of Dietrich Westermann, Berlin; and the Gestalt theory approach of Wilhelm Czermak in Vienna. After the decline of the Vienna school and the closing of the Oriental Seminar in Berlin this synthesis seemed to be a historical necessity at the now oldest German Africanistic institution in Hamburg. (A direct succession to D. Westermann's approach can be noticed at the later established Institut für Afrikanistik in Cologne under its director Prof. Oswin Köhler (born 14.10.1911).)

Besides the general situation of linguistics in Germany at the beginning of this century that was characterized by various attempts of anti-positivistic reaction towards neogrammarian positions, there are two factors worth mentioning which determined the development of Africanistics in Germany as an autonomous academic discipline: the colonial period with its determined practical needs--midwife as well as nurse for the young science; and the impact of powerful personalities--of which I shall restrict myself to Carl Meinhof, Dietrich Westermann, Wilhelm Czermak, and Johannes Lukas.

Carl Meinhof's (1857-1944) basically neogrammarian approach was thinly laid over with a sympathetic reception of Wilhelm Wundt's Völkerpsychologie. His at times rather daring explorations into the fields of semantics which he carried out in order to establish a "psychological" comparative method in addition to the traditional historical comparative method (cf. Meinhof 1943: 103) were considered by the author himself as intrusions of the linguist into the domains of philosophy and psychology. Meinhof finally failed to integrate into his linguistic works his broader interest in African civilizations which had been roused by the close contact of the former parson with missionary field problems of Bible translating.

Dietrich Westermann (1875-1956) who at the same time was the most important and eloquent promoter of an applied Africanistics' practical services for the colonial administration, introduced his

personal learning and shift of interest from linguistics to ethnology into a model of "comprehensive" Africanistics that was meant to serve, among others, the practical needs of the colonial administration for a scientifically based acculturation management. Unlike the theologian Meinhof's monogenetic conception, Westermann though with heavy missionary background as well advanced rather a diffusionistic concept of language and culture, thus stressing the importance of languages-in-contact phenomena in Africanistic research. Sociological problems of language use, especially the development, functions, and dynamics of African lingua francas, as well as sociolinguistic dialects such as secret, ritual, and women's speech were natural fields of study according to Westermann. His approach to one of the core problems of ethnolinguistics, the relation of language to cognition which had occupied quite a number of German scholars in the 20's and 30's following Westermann and v. Hornbostel (both 1927) was that of the study of "sound symbolism". The richness of ideophones and onomatopoeia in African languages was a challenge to the psychological spirit of time in the post-World-War-I epoque. For Westermann language is the expression of collective conscience and common experience, and he never ceased to point out the social function of language as an integrating element of the speech community. At the same time he taught that language itself must be the vehicle by which Africanistics serves one of its major societal functions: that of a transmitter and interpreter between different cultures such as European and African. His comprehensive model has influenced almost every German Africanist. It contains cultural and linguistic studies in synchronical as well as historical perspective. Three fields of applied studies namely Eingeborenenlenkung (acculturation guidance), language planning, culture transmission and language teaching, which were sometimes called "practical" Africanistics (e.g. by Lukas) contrast with at least seven fields of "theoretical" Africanistics with either a prevalent "static" or "dynamic" (in the de Saussurian sense) perspective. Extrapolated from his writings, Westermann's aggregative (as opposed to an integrative) model of comprehensive Africanistics can be shown graphically as follows:

Africanistics				
cultural			linguistic	
	diachronic	synchronic		diachronic
(static)	Ethnohistory	Ethnography	Descriptive Linguistics	Historical Linguistics
(dynamic)	Acculturation Studies	Sociolinguistics		Language-in-contact
(applied)	Acculturation Guidance	Culture Transmission & Language Teaching		Language Planning

Fig. 1



Westermann's model was a legitimate extension of Carl Meinhof's general ideas about the subject of an autonomous academic discipline called Africanistics. The common inductive approach united what one might call the Prussian School of Africanistics in Berlin and Hamburg. The Vienna School around Wilhelm Czermak (1889-1953) seemed to show a preference for a deductive approach that originated from a synthetic reaction of Ganzheitspsychologie and Gestalt theory against Wundt's physiological psychology and Herrmann Paul's psychologically conceived philological individualism. The basic idea was the concept of the whole as being more than a sum of all its parts, and of the existence of Gestalt qualities that show distinct characteristics independent of the different components that constitute the whole. The paradigm is the melody that remains recognizable as a Gestalt even after its parts, i.e. the sequence of the tones are transposed into a different key. Czermak combined concepts of Gestalt theory with romantic concepts of national mentality and national soul reminiscent of Wilhelm von Humboldt's thoughts. He searched for manifestations of the "African Soul" behind every individual language, accessible through living speech as well as through written records. He rejected the neogrammarian approach denying historical comparativism the right to define the only legitimate goals of linguistic study and disqualified those methods as relicts of a bygone century's thinking. He stressed the expressive and pragmatic aspects of language; his introspective linguacentric method bears a close resemblance to any ethnolinguistic approach.

The common denominator of those three currents in pre-war German Africanistics is a superordinary semantic approach to the study of structure of African languages which themselves are viewed as being embedded in a specific socio-cultural network within which any particular language serves its different functions. The synthesis of those three currents had been at the bottom of most of Johannes Lukas' teaching after 1954 in Hamburg, and it has been attempted to be put into praxis for the first time on the occasion of the Lake Chad Programme. Metaphorically speaking Lukas stripped Czermak's largely intuitive approach of all its antiquitated psychologisms and freed Westermann's comprehensive Africanistics of its colonialistic aspects, then welded the two together with Meinhof's overall historical comparative interests and added a concept of areality, by which I mean the taking into account of the impact of any one geographical region upon the linguistic and cultural patterns predominantly through diffusion by contact: The region becomes the common denominator for all geographically orientated disciplines that deal with the different aspects of the same geographical area. Thus especially linguistics, ethnology, and history can be integrated through common regional reference by stressing their areality component. Applied to the autonomous state of Africanistics within the traditional European academic organisation this means that the old question whether Africanistics is an areally defined general linguistics or rather a linguistic anthropology is void altogether: any autonomous discipline must be in a position to crystallize its own specific object of study

either by its own methods or by a transdisciplinary integration of a variety of methods pertaining to the same theoretical framework. For Africanistics this could be the areality concept of "Africinity", however it may become defined varying according to the methodological and terminological apparatus applied. The areality concept can serve as the integrative moment of Africanistic studies at different geographical/regional levels above the basic unit which is the single speech community--even above the continental frame in Afro-Asian and Afro-European studies in the pursuing of questions whether and which like phenomena may be due to diffusion, convergence, or common genetic properties.

### 3. Towards an integrative model of Africanistics

Africanistics as conceived in the above sense is characterized by its triple base in linguistics, ethnology, and history, the latter losing its autonomous character through integration as the diachronic vs. the synchronic perspective. In this way it will become possible to progress from purely diachronic linguistics of neogrammarian origin, i.e. the unilinear reconstruction of earlier stages by means of linguistic comparison alone towards a true historical perspective that makes use of all sources of historical information external and internal evidence alike. By this integrated approach we can deal appropriately with the dynamics of change that become apparent in synchronically observable processes. Through the analysis and adequate description of these dynamics in language use we might eventually grasp the areality phenomenon of Africinity which ought to manifest itself in "Africanisms" in the characteristics and trends of observable processes--provided the validity of the hypothesis of areality as a relevant sociological as well as psychological and linguistic variable.

Empirical Africanistics then operates with a wide concept of la parole or code which includes the pragmatic aspects of linguistic performance, whereas theoretical Africanistics will have to interpret the term la langue in the sense of communicative competence viewed also in its cognitive aspects of world perspective.

This triple based model of Africanistics which I call integrative as opposed to Westermann's aggregative model, may graphically be represented as below, showing three possible major subfields of specialized studies: (a) synchronic ethnolinguistics--understood as linguacentric as well as comparative ethnographies of communication (D. Hymes); (b) historical ethnolinguistics--in the sense of Greenberg's (1947) "social diachronic studies"; (c) historical linguistics.

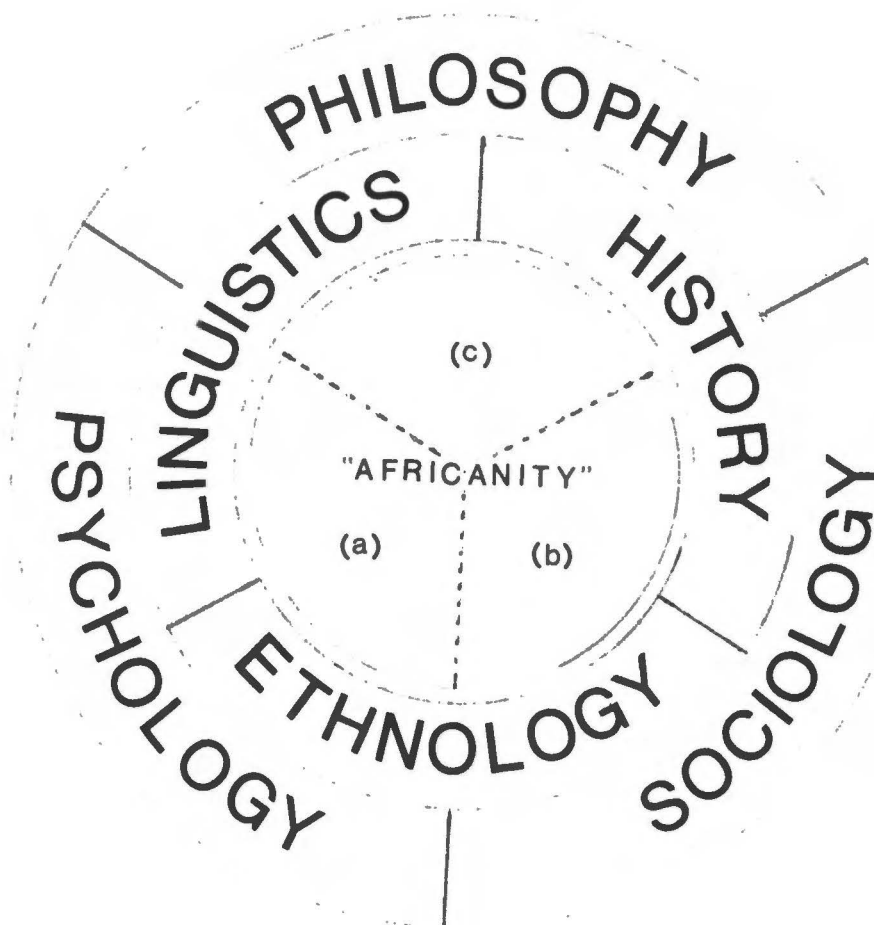


Fig. 2

Since Africanistics is basically an empirical science a vital question is how to transpone theoretical concepts into practical work which to a considerable extent consists of field research and the consequent evaluation and interpretation of the material. A focal point of study has to be the text as authentic document of native culture. The conception implies the application of philological techniques since ethnolinguistics functions as the philology for societies that did not develop philological traditions of their own (Hymes 1964). A typology of texts becomes a necessary prerequisite of ethnolinguistic study as Hockett (1954:123) had pointed out that "the impact of inherited linguistic pattern on activities is, in general, least important in the most practical contexts, and most important in such goings-on as story-telling, religion, and philosophizing...". In Germany Westermann had admonished the need for comprehensive text analyses several times. "Grammar deals primarily with 'forms'; it is the morphology of a language. Since, however, in many African languages forms exist



in extraordinary richness and variety, the grammarian is apt to concentrate his attention too exclusively on their representation. This is the case in most African grammars. They deal with forms of speech, but say little or nothing about syntax, although in it the structure of the language, the way of expressing thought, is most clearly revealed...but even single sentences are living speech only to a limited extent; in most cases they have been taken out of a larger context, in which their life was embedded. In order to fully grasp this life, coherent texts are needed, noted down direct from the mouth of native speakers." (Westermann 1939:24f.). But the mere edition of text material as such is not sufficient. Hymes (1964) once pointed to "past failures...of making native text materials usable by others" and has claimed that "an analysed and edited text fit for publication is not mere data, but a scholarly product". The development of sociolinguistics in recent years provides ample techniques for the study of language in its ethnographic context. Based on the assumption "that the full range of speech activity of a community is structured" (Hymes 1964) all sociolinguistic approaches whether of inter-community or intra-community perspective will have to become stock in trade in Africanistic work. Linguistically discernable social attitudes of role and status within African monolingual as well as multilingual speech communities are as natural objects of study as are the facets of world perspective hidden behind the manifestations of linguistic competence in the performance of native speakers. Besides textlinguistic analyses, structural semantic approaches to lexicon, e.g. in the determination of semantic fields will yield ethnolinguistically relevant results. The use of video tapes in the field in order to record features of interaction patterns, e.g., between narrator and listeners in African communities will open up the subfield of contrastive pragmalinguistics, to mention just another example.

#### 4. Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on an academic discipline's historical development in Germany. Such reflexions usually imply a critical evaluation of its philosophical background and salient theoretical issues. Since a science is defined according to its particular object of study and/or the methodological approach(es) to a given object of study I have suggested the concept of "Africanity" in the sense of scientifically definable and thus describable and explainable manifestations of African-ness, to fulfill the requirement of Africanistics' particular object of study. In order to fulfill the second requirement for a well established science it chooses as its theoretical frame a trans-disciplinary integration of semantic, pragmatic, and historical aspects. Africanistics can offer valuable contributions to the general discussion of an integrated theory of language insofar as it is based on the pragmatic aspect of language, and is thus in a position to provide necessary cross-language and cross-cultural data in this field. Even though at times it might be liable to lose its identity when it merges with "pure" sociological approaches

it is, however, not likely to do so with respect to logic and psychology, just to mention certain aprioristic tendencies in current linguistic theory. Though it is definitely not the task of Africanistics to develop models of linguistic competence, performance, or pragmatics, it does have to live up to the expectation that it can contribute to the development of such models. On the other hand Africanistics provides a testing ground for the validity of any areality hypothesis like the proposed concept of Africanity: The existence of, first of all, psycholinguistically definable areal features of human verbal behaviour in African speech communities--a concept that otherwise could be termed "linguistic Africanness"--might prove to be of stimulating relevance to the general study of language acquisition and language universals. In a phase of various ethnocentric and deductive approaches to core problems of linguistics, Africanistics among other sciences offers data for an inductive approach that allows continuously higher levels of generalisations towards universally valid categories of language. Furthermore, in the field of sociology, it provides equally valuable empirical contributions to the problems of nationalism and ethnicity in Africa. Though within the international frame of linguistic science the role of Africanistics as a corrective element to general linguistics may be a minor one, it could prove to be more important with respect to currents in West German linguistic theory, the unscrupulous ethnocentrism of which is only too apparent in its fixation upon neoromantic concepts of "mother-tongue" and the consequent determination of the geistige Zwischenwelt (spiritual mediary world) through the linguistic mediary world which parallels Whorf's thesis of linguistic determinism. In West Germany Africanistics could well play the role which American Indian Studies have played so successfully in the development of linguistics in America before Second World War, the more so, since both German traditional Africanistics--though at times it had been heavily laid over with colonial interests--and neoromantic German linguistics of the Weisgerber School rest upon the common heritage of Wilhelm von Humboldt's language philosophy.

Although the diversity of surface structure in different languages is the starting point for the approaches proposed above, it should have become clear that I am not suggesting the revival of linguistic determinism even though aspects of the Humboldtian language philosophy and the Whorfian hypothesis are showing through--as probably can never be avoided when dealing with the subject of language diversity. Let me conclude my paper with a quotation from Wilhelm von Humboldt's famous work, "Concerning the diversity of man's linguistic structure and its influence on the spiritual development of the human race": "To search for the diversity of human language structure, and describe it in its substantial qualities, to arrange the seemingly indefinite multiplicity in a simpler manner from correctly chosen standpoints, to pursue the sources of that diversity and, first of all, its influence on thinking, perception, and mentality of the speakers, and to follow the course of the spiritual development of mankind through all changes of history through language which is deeply woven into it

and accompanies it from step to step, this is the important and multifold business of the general study of language." (from Steinthal 1883:150. Translation my own.).

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The Lake Chad Programme was financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

<sup>2</sup>So far two articles of mine have been published:

Wolff, E. 1974/75. Neue linguistische Forschungen in Nordost-nigeria. (New linguistic research in Northeastern Nigeria.) *Afrika und Übersee* 58.1:7-27.

Wolff, E. 1974/75. Sprachwandel und Sprachwechsel in Nordost-nigeria. (Language change and language shift in Northeastern Nigeria.) *Afrika und Übersee* 58.3:187-212.

<sup>3</sup>These were:

Lukas, J. 1934. Die Gliederung der Sprachenwelt des Tschadsee-Gebietes in Zentralafrika. *Forschung und Fortschritt* 29.10:356-7.

Lukas, J. 1936. Hamitisches Sprachgut im Sudan. *ZDMG* 90:579-88.

Lukas, J. 1936. The linguistic situation in the Lake Chad area in Central Africa. *Africa* 9:332-49.

Lukas, J. 1936. Neue Aussichten zur sprachlichen Gliederung des Sudan. *Proceedings of the International Congress of Linguists*. Copenhagen, 186-81.

Lukas, J. 1939. Linguistic research between Nile and Lake Chad. *Africa* 12:335-49.

<sup>4</sup>These were:

Hoffmann, C. 1955. *Untersuchungen zur Struktur und sprachlichen Stellung des Bura*. Dissertation, Hamburg.

Jungraithmayr, H. 1956. *Untersuchungen zur Sprache der Tangale in Nordostnigerien*.

Schubert, K. 1971/72. Zur Bedeutung und Anwendung der Verbalparadigmen im Hausa und Kanuri. Dissertation. *Afrika und Übersee* 55:1-49, 208-27, 267-300; 56:90-118.

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- . 1939. The study of African languages. Present results and future needs. *Africa* 12:12-26.